



### Lincoln, Pryor, Snyder Highlight Rural Veterans Health Care Initiatives with Senator Jon Tester of Montana

U.S. Senators Blanche Lincoln and Mark Pryor and Congressman Vic Snyder today welcomed Senator Jon Tester (D-Mont.) to Little Rock's VA Hospital to highlight priorities for improving access to health care for veterans living in rural areas.

"While in the Senate, I have made enhancing access to care and services for our veterans and their families a top priority," said Lincoln, who serves as Chair of Rural Outreach for the Senate Democratic Caucus. "I am encouraged that the VA is placing a greater focus on our rural veterans. In 2007, the VA established its Office of Rural Health, at my and others' urging, and just this year, the VA provided \$250 million for rural health initiatives. These are important steps, but we have more progress to make, and I will continue my fight to ensure our veterans and their families receive the quality care they have earned and deserve."

"The men and women who fight for our freedom need the best training before they step in a war zone, the best equipment on the battlefield, and the best care when they return," Pryor said. "Our rural veterans deserve to have access to quality doctors, hospitals, mental health services, and other essential care no matter where they live, and initiatives like the Rural Veterans Healthcare Improvement Act will help ensure these needs are met. I will continue to honor the service of our vets in the Senate and fight to protect the principles they fought to preserve."

"This year Congress funded a substantial expansion of services addressing the health care needs of our rural veterans," said Snyder. "One of the main issues for rural veterans has been access to quality care. Our funding allowed for the VA to establish new outpatient clinics, strengthen the collaboration efforts between federal and community partners, explore innovative uses of technology for remote care like telemedicine, and fund pilot programs to close health gap of veterans in rural areas."

"I've been pleased to have the chance to spend the day with my Arkansas friends who care so much about America's veterans and who provide such strong leadership for rural America," Tester said. "I've been working on the Senate Veterans Affairs Committee to improve health care for rural veterans, and I'm proud to work with such great colleagues in Blanche and Mark."

Nearly eight million veterans are enrolled in the VA Health Care System and three million of them live in rural areas. Rural veterans face numerous challenges accessing health care, but one of the most significant is the shortage of providers, particularly mental and specialty providers. Insufficient funding of VA health care and the VA claims backlog have compounded the problem.

The lawmakers vowed to fight for greater access to care for veterans living in rural areas far from VA facilities. Among the priorities they discussed was Tester's Rural Veterans Healthcare Improvement Act, which would provide new avenues for the Veterans Administration (VA) to provide greater access to care for veterans living in rural areas far from VA facilities. Lincoln and Pryor are cosponsors of the bill.

The Rural Veterans Healthcare Improvement Act would:

- Permanently set the rate of reimbursement for disabled veterans traveling to and from a VA facility at a minimum of 41.5 cents per mile.

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- Authorize transportation grants for Veterans Service Organizations to provide better transportation service in rural areas.
- Establish Centers of Excellence for rural health research and education that would examine ways to improve delivery of health care to rural veterans.
- Authorize the VA to conduct demonstration projects on alternatives for expanding care for veterans in rural areas.
- Authorize the VA to contract for mental health services for recent veterans. There is a significant need for mental health providers throughout rural America, and the VA and private practice often find themselves competing for the same pool of prospective employees. This provision helps avoid that conflict by granting the VA the ability to provide these services in concert, not competition, with local providers.

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